

# **Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's Remarks**

**At the**

## **Richard Etheridge Commissioning**

Fort Lauderdale, FL  
Friday August 3, 2012

I am so proud to be here today to welcome the Coast Guard's newest Sentinel-Class cutter – the RICHARD ETHERIDGE - into active service on the eve of the Coast Guard's 222nd year of service to this great nation.

And this isn't just our Service anniversary. This year also brings the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the commissioning of another Coast Guard Cutter honoring the work done by Richard Etheridge and his crew, the Island-Class Cutter PEA ISLAND. When two cutters in active service are named in recognition of your service - you are definitely doing something right.....

I want to start today by reading part of a very brief – but very important - letter....

*“Respectfully referred to the Secretary of Transportation ... with the recommendation that Richard Etheridge, colored, now a surfman at Life Saving Station No. 16...be appointed as Keeper of Life Saving Station No. 17....”*

This letter was written in 1880. It was from the *Superintendent* of the Lifesaving Service, Sumner Kimball, to the *Secretary* of the Treasury.

Forty years earlier, that same Richard Etheridge had been born into slavery near Oregon Inlet, just north of Pea Island Station.

Only 15 years earlier he had become a Freeman by joining and serving in the Union Army during the Civil War.

And now, he was being recommended by the Superintendent for command of a station. In an era of such open and hostile racism, post-Civil War, why was Richard Etheridge chosen for this job?

That's what I want to talk to you about today.

Unlike the Cutter PEA ISLAND, the cutter behind me is named for a *single* individual - Richard Etheridge – because it is through individuals like him that our service has grown and thrived through 222 years of American history. A terrific example that one person can truly make a difference.

Our Sentinel-Class Fast Response Cutters will all be named for exceptional Coast Guard enlisted heroes - for as much our success depends upon working together with our shipmates, each Coast Guard man or woman is an individual who is capable...and expected to make a difference.

As I look at the crew of the Etheridge and all the other young Coast Guardsmen I meet, I know that each of them possesses the skills and talents to make a difference, just like Richard Etheridge. We expect to build 58 of these cutters. And while we've named the first 14, there are plenty left. And there are plenty of Coast Guard heroes out there.

So as we look to these Coast Guard heroes, what would we find that sets them apart? What do they have in common?

I told you I wanted to talk about why Richard Etheridge was chosen as the Keeper of the Pea Island Station. As I've studied Etheridge and other great figures in Coast Guard history, I've found three common traits - and all of them relate to a topic I began to share with the Service in my first State of the Coast Guard address in 2011: proficiency. Those three traits - the ones that are visible over and over again in the successful exploits of our service - are Proficiency in Craft, Proficiency in Leadership, and a Disciplined Initiative.

I spoke again about the necessity for proficiency in my most recent State of the Coast Guard address. And in my Coast Guard day message that went out yesterday, I focused on proficiency and those three common attributes I see in Richard Etheridge and that are critical to our service.

Some months ago, at the commissioning of the BERNARD WEBER, I spoke of the first of these traits, Proficiency in Craft. As you'll remember from your Coast Guard History, BERNARD WEBBER demonstrated remarkable seamanship as he piloted his 36-foot motorized wooden lifeboat in what was a perfect storm, leading the rescue of crewmen from the foundering 500-foot tanker PENDLETON that had broken in two in treacherous seas.

And now, as we bring this newest cutter into active service, I cannot think of a better example of all three of those attributes than Richard Etheridge.

As an African-American in the post-civil war south, Etheridge certainly had challenges in his mission to be a successful surfman and Keeper. But it was his embodiment of these traits that allowed him to overcome those challenges despite the prejudice of the day.....

I also saw the name of Richard Etheridge on the rolls of Station # 16, Bodie Island Station in September of 1879. On those rolls he was the lowest ranked surfman at the station. Yet, just two months later, when an irresponsible and incompetent Keeper at the nearby Pea Island Station needed a replacement, Richard Etheridge was person selected.

So how did that happen?

The officer who recommended him for the job, LT Charles Shoemaker, wrote in a letter to Sumner I. Kimball, the Superintendant of the Lifesaving Service that

*“Richard Etheridge is 38 years of age [and] has the reputation of being as good a surfman as there is on this coast, black or white...”*

It was *proficiency*. Those in authority recognized his proficiency and that was what mattered. The service was facing heavy criticism in the face of loss of life and property and needed skilled Keepers. Despite the overt and stifling racism of the time, his Proficiency of Craft got him the job.

LT Shoemaker's letter continued: *“I am aware that no colored man holds the position of keeper in the LifeSaving Service. I have given the matter as careful consideration as I am capable of and have weighed every argument for and against its adoption.... I am fully convinced that the efficiency of the*

*service at his station will be greatly advanced by the appointment of this man to the Keepership..."*

After Etheridge was appointed Keeper, the white surfmen were transferred out and black crewmen from other stations were ordered in. And this new crew had a successful first season. They proved that the placement of Etheridge in the Keeper position was a great decision.

Unfortunately, shortly after the station had closed for that first season, the station house burned to the ground. Although the culprit was never identified, an investigation identified arson as the cause.

But Etheridge and his crew would not allow those who wished for their failure to win. Etheridge and his men prevailed on land as they would on the sea for years to come. Before the following season, they rebuilt their station house, from the ground up, in just 7 weeks.

But Keeper Etheridge knew instinctively that his own proficiency of craft alone was not enough. He knew that he needed his crew to be just as proficient. And he knew that he needed to lead them there. Just as he understood the necessity for Proficiency of Craft, he also understood the requirement for Proficiency of Leadership.

He developed rigorous lifesaving drills that his crew performed 6 days a week. He demanded swift obedience and required strict adherence to standards of appearance. We know how hard Etheridge trained his men because he kept meticulous records of their daily activities. Patrols, drills, and inspections were conducted continuously. He trained his crew until satisfied they could take on any mission. And on Sundays, their "rest day", Etheridge read the regulations to his crew and quizzed them on their knowledge of procedure. The Coast Guard still relies on – and requires – this type of leadership. It inspires us. It motivates our crews. It allows us to reach that which was thought unachievable.

...Don't worry, CDR Lee – I don't expect you to read Coast Guard regulations to the crew this Sunday....Next weekend will be fine....

And Keeper Etheridge did go on to do amazing things. He and his crew would rescue hundreds of souls, including their most famous rescue, that of the E.S. NEWMAN. The E.S. NEWMAN was caught in an October

Hurricane in 1896 on her way from Providence to Norfolk. When her captain realized there was no hope for making it safely to port, he grounded his ship close to shore near Pea Island and shot off a flare. That evening to the storm was so bad Etheridge had kept his men from patrolling the beach with fear that they would be swept away by the tide. But surfman Theodore Meekins, who as watching the coast, spotted the distress signal, and reported to Keeper Etheridge.

When Keeper Etheridge and his crew arrived on scene, it soon became apparent that the normal lifesaving procedures would not be effective. Their Lyle Gun – used to shoot a line to a vessel in distress and establish a Breech's buoy – could not reach the ship. Strong winds and high tides kept the E.S. NEWMAN too far off shore. Keeper Etheridge later wrote in his log "It seemed impossible under such circumstances to render any assistance."

When the prescribed and established lifesaving procedures failed, it was then that Keeper Etheridge demonstrated that final trait I spoke of – one that comes only with Proficiency of Craft and Proficiency of Leadership: Disciplined Initiative.

He recognized that he needed to deviate from the normal operational doctrine and exercise on-scene initiative if he was to rescue the crew of the foundering vessel. He trusted in his crew and the training and discipline he had instilled in them. He directed two of his surfmen to bind themselves together with a line. These two surfmen then grabbed a second line and fought their way through the wind and breaking surf until they reached the foundering E.S. NEWMAN. When they reached the distressed vessel, the second line was tied to a survivor and the crew on shore pulled the survivor and the two surfmen back to the shore. They repeated this process ten times that night – *ten times* – until they had rescued all of the survivors aboard the ship.

It is interesting to note that on the first trip out to the C.S. NEWMAN, a wave caught the leading surfman and knocked the air out of him. That wave would have carried him away and may have ended the rescue right there – and meant certain death for the crew of the C.S. NEWMAN – had he not been tied to his fellow surfman. He was bound to his shipmate the same way that training and discipline binds every member of a crew to the

other. While one person can truly make a difference, bound together we are practically unstoppable.

We are truly fortunate today to have with us the descendants of some of the men who made that amazing swim and accomplished the rescue that evening.

Theodore Meekins' Great-Grandson is LCDR Dwayne Meekins is here. I'm honored to have him join us today. The Meekins' are a wonderful Coast Guard family. LCDR Meekins' father, Capt. Dwight Meekins, was an accomplished Coast Guard pilot.

We also have (retired) Chief Warrant Officer Frank Hester, Ms. Joan Collins, and Mr. Kelford Collins – descendants of Surfman Dorman Pugh. Dorman Pugh drove the station's mule-drawn cart to the beach that night and helped bring the survivors to safety. Thank you so much for being here today.

As I mentioned when I began my remarks today, 20 years ago the Coast Guard honored the lifesavers of the Pea Island Station with the christening of the 47<sup>th</sup> Island Class Patrol Boat PEA ISLAND. Not long afterwards, thanks in no small part to the tremendous efforts of Coast Guard Rear Admiral Stephen Rochon – who is with us here today and whose wife Shirley is the sponsor of this ship – the entire crew of the Pea Island Station all received the long-delayed but richly deserved Gold Lifesaving Medal for the rescue of the E.S. NEWMAN.

It is fitting then that we are here today to commission this ship and honor Keeper Richard Etheridge himself. Because of his Proficiency of Craft, Proficiency of Leadership and Disciplined Initiative, the Pea Island Station became known as the tautest station on the Carolina coast. Richard Etheridge became a legend and for 25 years led his station to success. Today he's a revered figure in the Coast Guard who is remembered for more than being the first black station keeper in the Service. He is remembered as a consummate professional who was recognized by all men, black and white, as a true professional. That indeed is a well deserved honor.

However, this ceremony and my remarks today cannot fully or completely honor Richard Etheridge's service. That honor – and solemn responsibility

– belongs to you – the crew of the Coast Guard Cutter RICHARD ETHERIDGE.

The long hours and the hard work it takes to achieve proficiency is not easy. In fact it is hard. The crew of the RICHARD ETHERIDGE already knows something about hard work. Let me tell you, if you have never been part of a pre-commissioning crew, its hard work. [Looking at crew] Am I right?

I know that you are already well down the road to the kind of proficiency I've talked about today – the kind that Richard Etheridge demonstrated over 100 years ago and the kind that men and women of this service have consistently demonstrated both before and since. And the purpose of this journey towards proficiency is so that when you spot a distant flare on a dark and stormy night, you are not only willing, but **ready** to respond.

And, by doing so, you will carry forward the spirit of Richard Etheridge and his Pea Island Crew – and you will truly honor them in the manner they deserve.

Individuals come together as a crew. We work as a crew, but we serve as a family. And we don't fear uncertain and stormy seas.

That's when we go to work.

That's when our country needs us the most. And that's when we are at our best.

We are Coast Guardsmen.

This is our chosen profession.

This is our way.

This is what we do.

Thank you. Semper Paratus.